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ABSTRACT

Previous studies of elocution and expression in America established the cultural significance of oral reading activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There is an abundance of information available from private oral expression schools established by four prominent Dallas teachers: Mrs. A. A. Cocke, Mrs. Pearl Wallace Chappell, Mrs. O. D. Woodrow, and Mrs. C. C. Latimer. This provides an opportunity of inestimable value for adding a small segment to the history of America's oral tradition. Acquisition of material included interviewing former students of expression, perusing their scripbooks, programs of recitals, notes, and textbooks, and examining the Dallas "Morning News" for publicity and critiques of expression activities. (EE)

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FOUR DALLAS SCHOOLS OF EXPRESSION, 1908 THROUGH 1930

Previous studies of elocution and expression in America establish the cultural significance of oral reading activities in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Studies of the prominent theories, teachers and performers give a general overview of interpretation of this era, but documented information regarding the origins and nature of specific reading practices in specific communities remains scant. In a paper presented at the 1971 Southern Speech Communication Association convention, Francine Merritt convincingly argued that filling such gaps is essential in charting interpretation's "missing history". The wealth of information available concerning private expression schools in Dallas from 1908 through 1930 provides an opportunity for adding a small section in the history of America's oral tradition.

By interviewing spirited former students of expression, perusing their scrapbooks, programs of recitals, notes and textbooks, and examining the Dallas Morning News for publicity and critiques of expression activity, I amassed a hearty amount of information. All evidence verified the private expression schools' vivid imprint on Dallas educational and entertainment history.

Meeting resource people and hearing them talk about the Dallas schools encouraged what had seemed at first a nebulous project. Mentioning the word "expression" to interviewees unleashed eager explanations that Dallas expression schools were run by trained teachers whose curricula were highly respected in the

community. They described the popularity of recitals and plays presented by students, the contribution of expression training to the numerous active women's study clubs, and the later participation by expression graduates in community theatre activities, in speech and drama education and in other cultural developments in Dallas history. Without hesitation, the former expression students interviewed, and many other Dallas residents, recognize the names of the most prominent Dallas expression teachers: Mrs. A. A. Cocke, Mrs. Pearl Wallace Chappell, Mrs. O. D. Woodrow, and Mrs. C. C. Latimer, and usually in that order.

Woodrow, Cocke, Chappell, and Latimer found eager support for their private schools of expression, and largely due to their enterprising personalities, the schools grew rapidly. A graduate of the Emerson College of Oratory and New England College of Oratory, both in Boston, Woodrow organized a school in her home as early as 1907. Cocke, a graduate of the Columbia School of Oratory in Chicago, opened a school in her home in 1911. One of Cocke's graduates, Chappell, opened her own school in 1915, which later became the Dallas Academy of Speech and Drama in the 1920's. After training at the American Academy of Dramatic Art in New York and the University of Chicago with Dr. S. H. Clark, Latimer moved to Dallas and promptly began her school in 1914.

The number of recitals, plays, and special programs reached a peak around 1917-1918 and remained high until 1930. Initially, the community needed the schools' educational and entertainment benefits. Later, as innovations in public speech education and entertainment developed, the schools' successes depended increasingly

on the community's regard for the expression teachers' early contributions to cultural endeavors in Dallas.

The teachers discovered enthusiastic pupils in Dallas. Private boarding schools, fashionable at the turn of the century, often offered expression. Students who could not afford the private schools' tuition could gain appreciation for literature and poise in public performance from Woodrow, Cocke, Chappell, or Latimer. The public viewed the expression schools as an avenue of extending cultural appreciation to more Dallas young people, and expression lessons were as popular as music and, later, dance lessons. Many adults, businessmen, and aspiring ladies' club leaders also enrolled for private lessons. In addition, parents enrolled the younger children in "Saturday classes" for recreation and enrichment.

Rapidly, the teachers capitalized on the most lucrative feature of expression studies: the diploma qualifying the graduate to teach expression. The teachers either employed their graduates as staff members, or they assisted in placing them in outlying communities as expression teachers. Woodrow, Cocke, Latimer and Chappell were able performers who also enjoyed teaching. They realized that many students desired artistic experience and teaching qualification and that a surprising demand existed in the Dallas area for the graduates trained in expression. For example, after expression training, interviewees variously served as expression staff assistants in Dallas, teachers in other public schools, actresses (most often through study at the American Academy and work with the Dallas Little Theatre), directors of dramatic activities, club leaders, and patrons of the performing arts in

Dallas. Many graduated from universities with degrees in English or Speech.

In addition to plentiful students, the teachers found audiences eager for their activities. From 1908 through 1930, the expression schools provided programs for clubs and civic events, held annual recitals, produced plays, and supported early community theatre work. However, in the 1920's entertainment competition burgeoned in Dallas. By 1926, when the little theater movement had become quite popular in America, Dallas boasted three little theater groups. The nature of the expression schools' community contribution shifted as the little theaters duplicated the schools' theatrical activities, bringing a higher degree of professionalism to local theatrics and offering another outlet for aspiring performers. Also, with diffuse movie and radio entertainment increasingly available to the public, the expression schools had to rely on a smaller more select audience of parents, students, and interested club organizations.

Competition from educational institutions also emerged in the 1920's. The public school system officially encouraged the speech program by creating "auditorium activities" as a new subject in 1921. The first speech courses appeared in the high schools in 1925, and drama was added to the curriculum in 1931.

By 1930, the necessity of the private expression schools' curricula and the popularity of the recitals and plays waned. Adapting her curriculum to train professional actors and radio announcers, Chappell's school continued to grow after 1930. Although Chappell's was the only school to thrive after 1930, private

expression lessons remained a respected cultural pasttime, and former students assisted the teachers in perpetuating the schools.

Trained at the Boston and Chicago expression schools, the Dallas teachers had exemplified, during the period 1908 through 1930, the popular trend away from elocutionary technique and toward "natural" interpretation. Woodrow, Cocke and Latimer studied with proponents of the "natural" philosophy: Emerson, Southwick, Blood and Riley, and Sargent, respectively. Further, S. H. Clark reinforced the "natural" approach for Latimer and Cocke. The same theory influenced Chappell during her study with Cocke.

The single exception to the "natural" trend was Woodrow's reliance on the White system of emotions, which she learned at the New England College of Oratory. The White system included extensive directions for portraying 186 emotions. To portray each emotion according to systematic interpretation, students followed detailed voice and body instructions. Extensively employing this imitative technique, Woodrow always remained closely identified with the era of elocution. In fact, she originally called her school the Woodrow School of Elocution and Physical Culture for several years before changing the name to Woodrow School of Expression.

For the most part, Dallas expression teachers consistently interpreted the "natural" theory in a sound manner with few idiosyncratic touches. However, to appeal to the audience and students of that era they made use of didactic literature bordering on the sentimental, humorous pieces, and the most elaborate, elevated style possible in the "natural" rendering of selections.

The community sanctioned the stresses on voice, poise, and personality development, and the teachers consistently kept these aims as highest priorities.

Interviewees mentioned important similarities and differences in the unique traditions of the Dallas schools. From the earliest years, Woodrow emphasized versatility of voice and body in performance. She believed perception of literature to be a by-product of trained performance technique. Students who demonstrated their mastery of White's system of emotions while performing the literature earned the Woodrow diploma. To benefit the students' characters and artistic appreciation, she consistently used classical and didactic literature. Spectacular in comparison to the other expression teachers, Woodrow strove to demonstrate the moral-aesthetic value of expression by often presenting festive religious pageants.

At Latimer's school of "Expression and Physical Education," she disciplined students with extensive physical exercises, dances and pantomimes to tone the body and enable full expression. As with physical exercises, Latimer considered voice study to be preparatory mechanics for the ensuing interpretive work. Latimer students perceived her preference for the "natural" approach. Remembering that she steered them away from superficial performances by emphasizing Clark's technique of "paraphrasing," they also described her insistence on fully dramatic performances through a process she labeled "sympathetic acting". Her expression philosophy uniquely combined an appreciation for lively performance and literary comprehension.

Although Cocke was a vigorous performer, always in demand about Dallas, her forte and priority in teaching was literary analysis. In various club lectures and at her school, Cocke evinced skill in analyzing classic literature and infecting others with her zeal for study. Unlike other Dallas expression teachers, she refused to select trite or sentimental literature for entertainment. Cocke criticized the students' diction, projection and breath control unrelentingly, yet she maintained emphasis upon naturalness in expression. Considering Delsartian technique superficial, she also disdained artificial tableaux or statue-posing.

Chappell also rejected Delsartian technique, but she encouraged pantomime exercises to stimulate imagination. Like her colleagues, Chappell rigorously trained her students in voice and diction, believing that voice should be the primary tool for interpreting the emotional tone in literature. She often used her own poetry for exercises, and she published an expression textbook for teaching young children, Chappell Normal Course in Expression. Her warm, demure approach to students inspired extreme admiration as the following effusive comment from a former student proves: "She is truly the Dallas Queen to everyone who has entered the portals of her school."

Literary study clubs grew around the talents and influences of Cocke and Chappell. Cocke fostered the Literature Department of the Dallas Woman's Forum and created the Browning Club. Recognizing Chappell's interest in literature, friends and former students formed the Pearl Wallace Chappell Literary Club. Never as active in club and lecture activities, Latimer and Woodrow still appeared as guest performers on occasion.

The Dallas expression schools maintained traditional rapport among students by establishing active alumni associations. Meeting monthly for study programs, their activities consistently made the Dallas News' society column. In 1915 the expression teachers and various alumni formed the Dramatic Readers Club, with Cocke serving as the first president. The club still functions today, with former expression students meeting and performing for each other. Over the years, Cocke, Woodrow, Chappell, Latimer and many of their students presided over Dramatic Readers Club activities.

The singular criticism expressed by interviewees was the teachers' dogmatism regarding literary material: their choices being primarily the Bible, Shakespeare, Browning, and what today would be called "greeting card" verse. However, interviewees maintained that each teacher consistently reflected a steadfast interest in literature and in the increased literary appreciation that a performance could produce. All of them claimed that the Dallas teachers were able to enrich their students' personalities and characters by instilling appreciation for literature and the discipline of performance. They stressed the fact that their devotion to the Dallas teachers and their energetic response to the instruction was typical of most Dallas expression students. Realizing that preferences for didactic and sentimental material reflected the era, they upheld the Dallas teachers' sincerity and artistry in teaching and performing the material. Overwhelmingly, they agreed that Woodrow, Cocke, Latimer, and Chappell encouraged their respect for literature and performance and that the schools contributed significantly to the cultural life in Dallas from 1908 through 1930.